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LETTER DATED 25 NOVEMBER 1994 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Pursuant to recent communiqués from my Government to the Security Council with respect to the Bihac pocket safe area, in particular my letter dated 22 November 1994 (S/1994/1328), I have the honour to present the attached Associated Press wire report, dated 25 November 1994, entitled "Playing down Bihac".

May I ask for your kind assistance in circulating this letter and its attachment as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Muhamed SACIRBEY
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex

ASSOCIATED PRESS WIRE REPORT FROM SARAJEVO DATED 25 NOVEMBER 1994

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (AP) - Putting its own spin on news from the front, the United Nations military command in Bosnia has been playing down violations of the Bihac "safe area".

Authoritative reports of Serb violations of the United Nations-protected zone would call into question the credibility of the United Nations peace-keeping effort. They would also increase pressure on NATO and the United Nations to resort to ever greater use of force, with unforeseeable consequences.

With this in mind, United Nations information officers have gone to great lengths to put a favourable spin on events in Bihac, much as they did during April's siege by Serbs of Gorazde, another United Nations "safe area" in eastern Bosnia. NATO's first air strike on Serb positions occurred in Gorazde.

At the least, spokesmen for the United Nations peace-keepers have sought to raise doubts about the credibility of reports of Bihac "safe area" violations by Serb fighters from Bosnia and neighbouring Croatia.

For example:

- At a briefing last week, United Nations spokesman Lt. Col. Tim Spicer repeated assurances that rebel Serbs were respecting the Bihac zone, which is roughly six miles by five miles. He mentioned in passing, however, that a United Nations observation post had to be abandoned due to shell fire. Afterwards, reporters with access to United Nations maps discovered the post was inside the safe zone.

- At another briefing, Lt. Col. Jan-Dirk von Merveldt, another United Nations spokesman, said there was an unconfirmed report of a Serb helicopter firing a rocket in violation of the NATO ban on the use of aircraft by combatants. Reporters pressed von Merveldt to elaborate, and he admitted that a United Nations military officer had heard the sound of a helicopter followed by a rocket explosion. But the report was considered "unconfirmed", he said, because the officer "did not actually see it".

United Nations civilian officials in Croatia later blasted the Serbs for using a helicopter gunship in fighting around Bihac, in violation of the "no-fly" zone over Bosnia.

As fighting around Bihac intensified, the Bosnian Government claimed Serbs from Croatia had crossed the border and joined the battle in clear violation of United Nations orders.

United Nations spokesmen insisted the reports were unconfirmed. Sources with access to classified United Nations reports, however, said United Nations personnel in the Bihac area had reported the incursion.

The same pattern was followed when classified reports circulated that the Bosnian Serbs had entered the Bihac "safe area", a line they had been warned repeatedly not to cross. United Nations spokesmen finally acknowledged the incursion about two days after the reports first circulated.

Getting first-hand information about the situation in Bihac has proved difficult. Serbs controlling access to the area have refused to allow reporters to pass through their territory. The switchboard at United Nations headquarters in Zagreb, Croatia, has refused to patch reporters through to United Nations offices in Bihac so they could get a first-hand assessment from personnel on the ground.

In Gorazde, reports from United Nations military observers and aid workers in the enclave contributed to the international outcry over the Serb assault and NATO airstrikes.

NATO had threatened military action if the Bosnian Serbs entered the Bihac "safe area". Having finally acknowledged this had taken place, the United Nations began hinting that rather than ask NATO to force them out, they would try a novel approach: redrawing the map of the Bihac protected zone.

"We will insist on the line being respected fully", the United Nations commander in Bosnia, Lt. Gen. Sir Michael Rose, said Thursday. "I'm not saying the line will remain precisely where it is."

Editor's note. Robert H. Reid, the AP bureau chief in the Philippines, covered Yugoslavia in the 1980s and is on his third reporting trip to Bosnia.